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Concept of *Agni* and its Importance in Ayurveda: A Review

Mishra Gaurav,¹ Kumar Ashvini,² Sharma Swati.³

¹Post Graduate Scholar, ²Professor, Department of Panchakarma, ³Post Graduate Scholar, Department of Dravyaguna, Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara College of Ayurveda and Hospital, Hassan, Karnataka, India.

ABSTRACT

The Ayurvedic concept of *Agni* or fire is critically important to our overall health. *Agni* is the force of intelligence within each cell, each tissue, and every system within the body. Ultimately, it is the discernment of *Agni* that determines which substances enter our cells and tissues and which substances should be removed as waste. In this way, *Agni* is the gatekeeper of life. In fact, according to Ayurveda, when the *Agni* is extinguished, death soon follows. Ayurveda identifies a vast range of functions for which *Agni* is directly responsible, but it also teaches us that impaired *Agni* is at the root of all imbalances and diseases. Ayurveda identifies 13 distinct subtypes of *Agni* in the body, each defined by its specific physiological function as well as its location in the body. The mother of all of them is *Jathara Agni*, the central digestive fire that governs the digestion and assimilation of food. But there are many other fire components in the body's cells, tissues and organs that govern things like sensory perception and the nutrition of specific tissues. Localized manifestations of *Agni* also determine which substances can cross cell membranes and maintain cellular memory in our DNA. A poor diet, an unsupportive lifestyle, and unresolved emotions can easily hinder *Agni* by dampening any of these qualities throughout the system. Similarly, nurturing the qualities of *Agni* in a very general way has the potential to benefit *Agni* throughout the body. Hence understanding of *Agni* in one of the important concepts for the understanding of disease process as well as to prescribe principles of treatment.

Key words: *Agni*, *Jatharagni*, *Digestion*, *Assimilation*.

INTRODUCTION

According to Vedas the ancient texts of India and Ayurveda, *Agni* is worshipped in its divine form as the bringer and sustainer of life. When we honor our *Agni* thus, we become mindful of what we eat and how we accept it in ourselves.^[1] The term *Agni* is best

represented by biological fire. *Agni* is vital at physiological and pathological levels. As we take food stuffs to feed ourselves for nutrition, in the same way digestive fire also require constant feeding, therefore to carry out various biochemical pathways going on in our body. *Agni* is the cause of all diseases means majority of the diseases are outcome of malfunctioning of the *Agni*,^[2] which rightly has been called as central to health. *Agni* plays not only vital role in absorption of macro as well as micronutrients, but is destructive to pathogens also.

Types of *Agni*

Ayurveda has classified *Agni*'s into 13 subtypes in body,

- *Dhatvagni* - 7
- *Bhutagni* - 5
- *Jatharagni* - 1

Address for correspondence:

Dr. Gaurav Mishra

Post Graduate Scholar, Department of Panchakarma,
Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara College of Ayurveda and
Hospital, Hassan, Karnataka, India.

E-mail: drgauravmishra2349@gmail.com

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1. **Jatharagni** - (*Jathara* means Gastrium) is the prime *Agni* that nourishes the other *Agni*. *Jatharagni* refers to the whole process of digestion in digestive tract. It is related to the gastro-intestinal tract, converting the gross food particles into smaller particles which are then able to be absorbed.^[3] *Jatharagni* digests the food materials that consist of the five basic elements and transforms it for utilization by the respective *Dhatus Paramanus* (tissues). *Jatharagni* is also responsible for separation of the food material into the essence portion (*Prasad*) and the waste products (*Kitta*) in our body.^[4] The *Prasad Bhaga* once again gets divided into 3 fragments. The first portion forms the *Sthanika Dhātu* (Local tissue) or nourishes it. The second portion forms the *Poshaka Dhātu* (The supporting tissue or tissue responsible in the formation of its subsequent *Dhātu*). The third portion helps in the formation of *Upadhātu's* (sub-tissues). The *Kitta Bhaga* gets eliminated as tissue wastes and is finally eliminated from the body after joining the main metabolic wastes of digestion. During *Dhātu Paka* process heat and energy is liberated which is used for body functions.

2. **Dhatvagni** - refers to tissue metabolism. The nutrients digested and absorbed by the *Jatharagni* are then sent to their respective areas. For the *Dhatus*, these nutrients are not in a stage of absorption so to absorb them properly they have to be digested further with the help of *Dhatvagni*. Each *Dhātu* that we have seen would have different *Dhatvagni* to digest what comes to them thus absorbing the nutrients supplied. *Dhatvagni* is essential for the maintenance and growth of the *Dhatus*. Functions of *Dhatvagni* are mainly two. One is synthesis of new tissue. Second is to yield energy for the function of tissue. If *Dhatvagni* is impaired both of these will impair.^[5] The role of *Dhatvagni* is real important when it comes to treating various chronic diseases.

3. **Bhutagni** - The five *Bhutagnis* digest their own part of the element present in the food materials.

After the digestion of food by the *Bhutagni*, digested materials containing the elements and qualities similar to each *Bhutas* nourish their own specific *Bhoutika* elements of the body. So, all the exogenous substances must be subjected to *Bhutagni Paka* to become endogenous. Thus cause appropriate nourishment of tissues.^[6] It refers to the final digestion in liver. The whole universe is divided in 5 elements namely called *Panchabhutas*. The food that we eat would be also *Panchamahbhovatic* – full with five elements. Thus to digest food into perfect energy, each of us also require respective *Panchamahbhoot Agni* which could digest all elements in the simplest form in our body to provide us the energy and strength.

In Ayurveda, four states of the digestive fire (*Jatharagni*) have been elaborated,

1. **Vishama Agni (Variable)**: Here the digestive fire is disturbed by *Vata*. Because of variability in *Vata*, there are episodes of alternating cycles of strong appetite with loss of appetite and forgetfulness to consume foods.^[7] Gaseous-distension of the abdomen and constipation are striking signs. Cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, enlarged spleen, abdominal tumour, colic, flatulence, wind and eructation are outcome of *Vishama Agni*.

2. **Teekshna Agni (High)**: Here the digestive fire is disturbed by *Pitta*. In these cases, *Agni* is usually high and both *Pitta* and *Agni* share same properties. In these cases, immunity against diseases is good. Because of variability in *Pitta*, there are episodes excessive appetites.^[8] There are increasing chances of developing diarrhoea, bleeding - diathesis and toxemia (toxins in the blood). abdominal colic, anaemia, burning sensation, diarrhoea, haemorrhage, haemophilia, hepatitis, hepatomegaly, hyperacidity, jaundice, pain, pyuria, sour belching, tuberculosis, urine diseases, vertigo, yellow skin are outcome of *Teekshna Agni*.

3. **Manda Agni (Low)**: Here the digestive fire is disturbed by *Kapha*. Because of variability in *Kapha*, there are episodes of poor appetite,

sluggish metabolism and tendency to weight gain despite optimal food consumption.^[9] Excessive mucus or phlegm production and congestion are striking features. Blood circulation is poor and one can easily get attacks of chest congestion to sinusitis. Bronchial asthma, bronchitis, cough, excessive salivation from the mouth, fatigue and nausea are hallmark of *Manda Agni*.

4. ***Samaa Agni (Normal)***: Normal digestive fire is characterised by strong and appealing appetite that is easily satisfied with normal food. Digestive functions are proper; there are no episodes of gas, colic and constipation. *Samaa Agni* is largely responsible for human body nutrition and building strong foundation of seven tissues.^[10]

Agni versus Ama

In Ayurveda, the theory of *Agni* or biological fire is of prime importance. *Agni* is among the critical factors in determining optimal health and internal haemostasis. On the contrary, *Ama* is a toxin or pathogen, response for aetiology of all diseases.^[11] Major culprit behind *Ama* production is impairment of *Agni*, which in turn, destroys *Agni*. Thus a vicious cycle of impaired *Agni* and the production of *Ama* are established.^[12] Understanding basic relationship between *Ama* and *Agni* is of prime importance in treating the diseases. Maintaining good appetite, use of digestive stimulants and ensuring regular bowel movements are of prime importance in enkindling the digestive fire^[13] and preventing the production of root cause of all diseases, i.e. *Ama*.

Malfunctioning of *Agni* leads to production of *Ama* (undigested foods that remain in tract and act as antigens and are responsible for production of various diseases and autoimmune diseases). Production of *Ama* may be able to occur at the level of *Jatharagni* (improper digestion in digestive tract), *Bhutagni* (liver dysfunction) or *Dhatvagni* (disturbed tissue metabolism).^[14]

Proper functioning of digestive fire is evident from normal tone of the digestive-system, circulatory-system, strong immunity or resistance against diseases, proper tissue growth, and above all the

complexion.^[15] This description better deals with physiological significance of *Agni*. If *Jatharagni* is proper, balanced and healthy, the other forms of *Agni*'s under its control are also in equilibrium. Thus protecting and taking care of our Gut fire is mandatory for us to be healthy. The key to a healthy *Agni* is the intake of easily digested, freshly cooked, *Satvika* (Pure) and compatible foods eaten consciously at the appropriate times.^[16]

Ama is said to be the root cause of all diseases and can be indicated by lethargy, a coated tongue and foul breath.^[17] This undigested substance can be recognized today as high cholesterol, chronic fatigue syndrome, candida, diabetes, constipation, obesity depression, anxiety etc. In Ayurveda we believe that every diseased state arises as a result of *Ama*, whether physical or mental and all *Ama* is the result of malfunctioning of *Agni*.

If *Agni* (*Jathara Agni*) is normally functioning, the *Dhatvagni* also function normally in accordance. If digestive fire is not functioning properly, one has poor digestion, disturbed blood-circulation, poor complexion, low energy levels, flatulence and poor immunity against diseases. Thus promoting proper functioning of the digestive fire is treating the root cause of the diseases, according to Ayurvedic principles. If the *Jatharagni* is hyper-active, the *Dhatvagni* also will be hyper-active. This leads to tissue depletion (*Dhatukshaya*). If *Jatharagni* gets vitiated, it disturbs all the other *Agni*'s in the body. This results in lowering of cellular immunity and formation of systemic *Ama*. This is called *Dhatugata Ama* (cellular toxins). The cells get weak and lethargic. If this fire gets depleted, the metabolism gets disturbed. This in turn gives rise to a chain of pathological events which leads to many systemic illnesses. The sequence of weak *Jatharagni* followed by weak *Dhatu-Agni* (cellular fire) and formation of systemic and cellular *Ama* forms an ideal platform for many diseases to manifest. On the other hand if the *Jatharagni* is weak the *Dhatvagni* too will be weak.^[18] This depleted *Dhatvagni* will not be capable enough to metabolize the nutrients available at their disposal. There is an accumulation of unprocessed food (*Ama*),

improperly processed and formed *Dhatu* and toxins in the cells of the tissue.

DISCUSSION

Agni is the term given in Ayurveda for the whole process of energy liberation through digestion at the level of digestive tract and metabolism at the level of tissues. Digestion, metabolism and assimilation i.e. whole process of biological conversion and utilization of energy is symbolized by the term *Agni*. *Agni* is derivative of *Tejas* (fire) *Mahabhuta* it carries metabolic transformations in which the inherent feature is change.

When the *Agni* is extinguished man dies,^[19] when a man is induced with it adequately, he lives long in good health, when it is de-arranged, he begins to ail. Therefore the function of *Agni* is said to be the main stay of life. The food which is considered the nourishing factor of the *Sharira*, *Dhatu*, *Ojas*, *Bala*, *Varna*^[20] and other things, that very food too, is dependent for its nutrient action on the *Jatharagni* as from the undigested food, the *Sharira Dhatu* cannot be formed.^[21]

CONCLUSION

Agni is a basic essential of life and has been a proof of our evolution and a source of lot of innovations through ages. Even today much of our life activities depend on *Agni* and its utility in one or the other form. Human body too needs fire for the mechanisms of life to keep going and the life element depends on the quality and quantity of fire located in the system. There is an activity in each and every cell and according to Ayurveda this activity is more or less dependent on the fire, its quality and quantity in each of these cells. When *Agni* diminishes or gets destroyed, the life comes to an end with inevitable death. This is reflected by the fact that we generally keep warmth as long as we live (sign of life) and the body gets cooled when the person has lost his or her life (sign of death). These 2 signs reflect the presence of actively functioning *Agni* and its absence respectively. When the *Agni* is in a normal condition (qualitative and quantitative equilibrium) it supports

life unconditionally. When this *Agni* gets morbid or contaminated (disturbed in the form of either a pathological increase or abnormal decrease) it becomes a cause for many diseases. It is also said that all the diseases have their origin in the morbid *Agni* i.e. a disturbed *Agni* is the chief culprit in the causation of all psychosomatic diseases. We know that the morbid *Dosha's* cause diseases by attacking and disturbing the normalcy of body's tissues which are the mainstays of defence, immunity and maintenance of health. The morbidity of these *Dosha's* in the form of a pathological increase or decrease always depends on the status of *Agni*. If the *Agni* is functioning normally, the *Dosha's* also remain in an undisturbed form and support our body, mind and life. On the contrary if the *Agni* gets disturbed, the *Dosha's* too will get disturbed and cause many diseases by attacking the body's defences. Hence understanding of *Agni* is one of the important concepts for the understanding of disease process as well as to prescribed principles of treatment.

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